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MADE IN OKLAHOMA

by Pat Sturm

"Hi, Mom."

For the third time that week, we'd deposited capital into Ma Bell's coffers. The more the world disappointed Cindy Robinson, once of Weatherford, the more often she called home.

"I think I almost got mugged today, but I didn't realize it at the time."

Great. For this we'd invested every extra penny in dance lessons, gymnastic lessons, singing lessons, and time and gasoline to get there for almost eighteen years? And now, could I merely stand in the kitchen nearly two thousand miles away, unable to play Mama Bear and slap that mugger into the middle of next Tuesday?

Sage advice warns us to "Be careful what you wish, for you shall surely get it." The axiom stabbed me deeply the day I watched the kid disappear into the accordion tunnel leading to the airplane bound for New York City. Clad in pale green overalls, hightop Reeboks, and a puffy peach leather jacket, and hauling a dance bag splitting with the essentials of a nineteen-year-old, my red haired, fresh faced daughter set out to Make It On Broadway. She looked twelve. My heart felt a hundred and twelve.

I should have known. We'd worked hard to see that Cindy had the best training the state had to offer. Dance lessons since age two topped off by two summers at Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute made her marketable in dance.

Voice lessons at SWOSU and Oklahoma City University developed a resonant sound. And her rise up OKC's Lyric Theatre ladder (apprentice at 15, full chorus at 16, dance captain at 17, secondary leads at 18) clinched our fate: she would venture into the biggest, meanest city in the world and offer her talents to the quirkily selective powers of the theatre. I would pace the floor in calm, rural Weatherford and field phone calls.

"Never come up here without connections," she advised me to advise anyone else who might want to follow in her footsteps. Such wisdom after three weeks. "You can't even get an apartment here without knowing somebody." I had hyperventillated when she found a space to share with two other girls for only \$1600 a month. One room, a kitchenette, and a tempermental steam heater.

"Surely you can find something cheaper," I wailed.

"Mo-om. This one is a bargain, believe me."



IMAGE COMPOSITE BY J. BRADFIELD, SCOTT BOYD

Hefting someone else's discarded couch from the street to the apartment had also seemed a bargain. Hefting it back down again after refusing to share their tiny space with the city of roaches ensconced in the upholstery proved it otherwise.

We on the Oklahomafront raided cellar and attic; we packed up long-stored pans and blankets and silverware to stock the empty space. The UPS man enjoyed the installment story of our daughter the actress in New York City.

But Cindy had not gone to the Great White Way to languish in a rather ratty apartment with occasional heat. (At \$1600 a month it should have had gold leaf panels.) In addition to developing her talent, we'd also tried to instill solid midwestern values like self-confidence, goal orientation, and chutzpah. My husband says we created a pushy little broad. At any rate, during those first three weeks she did two shows at the World Trade Center and answered an ad in the paper calling non-Equity (actors' union) members who wanted to be Equity members to audition for *Candide*, slated for production in Atlanta. Hoping for a chorus part, she hardly needed Ma Bell to announce that she'd snagged the lead. Money rolled in for eleven weeks, the reviews praised her talent, she got her Equity card, and an agent called, wanting to represent her. Incredible luck.

Back in the city, however, she found the Big Apple peeled. In desperation, she took a job singing telegrams. "I was a raisin on Wall Street today, Mom," she phoned. She also donned a banana suit for an art gallery opening and a

chicken suit (plus a dozen balloons) for an executive birthday party. Of course she reached her destinations for these stellar performances in the most dignified of all New York transportations — the subway.

Again I felt shortness of breath in my safe haven in middle America. "Don't worry, Mom," she assured me. I look weirder than most New Yorkers, so they mainly leave me alone." I worried.

She continued to audition for shows.

Cindy (on Monday): I have an audition for *Forty-Second Street* tomorrow.

Mom (on Tuesday): How'd it go?

Cindy: Oh, fine. It was me and the rest of the tapping Amazons. The director took one look at my height and cut me without so much as a tap. And I had on heels and high hair and everything.

At 4' 11", her height, or lack of it, served to keep her out of Broadway chorus lines. Instead, she had to audition for nasty old leads. One of those was for the national tour of *Into the Woods*. Three times they called her in; three times she got thanks, but no thanks. Then about five months after the closing of *Candide*, and after about 50 singing telegrams and balloon deliveries, her agent called to say that they wanted to see her for *Into the Woods* again. "I don't know why," he said, "but they do."

This time she used Ma Bell only as a courtesy to call me at school. "Mom, I'm on BROADWAY!" Her incredible luck had kicked in again. Stephen Sondheim, writer of *Into the Woods*, had been at that fourth audition and

declared her hired — not for the tour, but for the Broadway production. While she was officially cast in a walk-on at the end of the show, she also covered three leads and went on in those parts over forty times in eleven months.

I don't know which subsequent event thrilled me the most: seeing her in the *Woods* float on TV (and hearing her name announced by Willard Scott to the whole of the United States) in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, or sitting in the audience in New York while she played Little Red Riding Hood. I mentally bit my nails waiting for the orchestra to strike up the overture. I loved my kid desperately, but she was just from Oklahoma, after all. How would she compare to all those professional people who'd done show after show 'til it had become their second — no, first nature? Oh me of little faith....

She skipped out in red cape and red curly wig, a sassy lass scarfing the baker's wife's cookies. She taunted the wolf, consoled Cinderella after the prince strayed, and helped Jack in the Beanstalk to go on after the giant orphaned them both. That evening I saw not Cindy Robinson, talented little girl from Weatherford, Oklahoma, but Cindy Robinson, leading actress — and rightly so — in a Broadway musical. Savvy New York theatregoers saw the same personna; the rise in applause when she took her bow affirmed my opinion. And yes, I did the motherly bit and leaned to the stranger next to me and whispered, "That's my daughter." The woman passed it on. After the show, I stood back while Cindy signed autographs outside the theatre.

A month after *Into the Woods* closed, Cindy began two-and-a-half years in the national tour of *Peter Pan*, with twelve weeks of it back on Broadway, and followed with an international tour of *Evita*. Now married to actor/director Jim Alexander, she's also come full circle at Lyric Theatre, playing leads in three summer productions. One evening as we wound down after a Lyric show she said, "Mom, I used to get so mad at those people in New York. They'd say, almost right to my face, 'Who is she? How'd she just walk in off the street and get this job?' But I didn't just walk in off the street. I'd had experience. I'd done at least twenty shows before I ever went to New York."

A trained professional at nineteen, her career was forged before she ever left the state. In every sense of the word, Cindy Robinson, Broadway actress, was made in Oklahoma.